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Historicising Emotion in *Crossing the River* by Caryl Phillips

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In evoking the historical dimension of emotion in the fiction of Caryl Phillips, I am proposing to examine the ways in which Phillips relates the emotional context of the historical periods in which he places his fiction to present day concerns with memory. Fiction that focuses on the need to remember the past relies on an implicit recognition that emotion plays a role in making the past comprehensible in the present. However its explicit role is often overlooked in favour of discursive approaches to history that emphasize the difficulties and pitfalls of any attempt to reconstruct the past in its emotional dimensions. My approach to the reading of Phillips is inspired by work that has been carried out by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers and literary critics interested in explaining how we can relate to the past in ways that are meaningful to our contemporary context without oversimplifying it to suit our present needs and preoccupations. This concern with ways of reading the past underlies the archaeological enterprise of Michel Foucault but also the writings of historians like Arlette Farge and Alain Corbin, whose work on the role of the senses has opened the study of history to aspects of culture and social life which require specific theoretical tools.¹ A recent example is the first two volumes of *Histoire des émotions* edited by Corbin and Georges Vigarello, in which one finds a series of articles written by historians specializing in

¹ The French historian Arlette Farge, in her work on subjects like poverty in eighteenth-century France, has taken an interest in emotion and the way it can be detected and interpreted on the basis of documents found in historical archives. Among her works are *La vie fragile: violence, pouvoirs et solidarités à Paris au xviii^e siècle* (1986) and *Effusion et tourment, le récit du corps: histoire du peuple au xviii^e siècle* (2007). Alain Corbin is known for his work on the role of the senses in the study of history. He is particularly famous for *Le miasme et la jonquille: l'odorat et l'imaginaire social, XVIII^e-XIX^e siècles* (1982) et *Les cloches de la terre: paysage sonore et culture sensible dans les campagnes au XIX^e siècle* (1994).

different periods of history. In an article in the first volume, Georges Vigarello reminds us that the word emotion originally referred to the body:

A disturbance affecting the machine before being perceived in relation to thought, the idea of being ‘moved’ during the fourteenth century, but also in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is located first of all in the body. A ‘passion,’ no doubt, but experienced as an almost physical shock or blow or tremor. (220)²

In an article entitled “The Greeks,” Maurice Sartre evokes the debate concerning the difference between a universalist view of emotion and a constructivist one, to which I will return, and affirms that “emotions fill the field of history just as they dominate the very life of individuals. The work of the historian cannot ignore the changing form of their manifestation, nor the evolution of our perception of them.” (19, my translation)

Historical fiction necessarily relies on a fictional representation of the emotions of characters caught up in history. My concern in looking at the role of emotion in *Crossing the River* is to measure the extent to which the historical relativity and variability of emotion is taken into account by the author in a way that points to an awareness of its impact on our capacity to imagine the past. I postulate that this does not simply reveal an understanding of the intellectual history of America, but a sensitivity to the particular difficulty of representing the emotional environment of slavery for twenty-first century readers. In *Black Milk: Imagining Slavery in the Visual Cultures of Brazil and America*, Marcus Wood discusses the difficulty of using photographs of slaves in order to understand their lives and reactions. He points out that because photography constituted “a new technology” and that “the people who took them [photographs] were frightened by this very quality, they did not, and do not, necessarily offer a new way of seeing or of visually encoding the world” (211). Wood analyses Ken Burns’s film documentaries *The American Civil War* in the light of the way in

² Jan Plamper, in *The History of Emotions: An Introduction*, points out that Pre-Socratic philosophers defined emotions as something that was external and not something produced within men themselves, traces of which he sees in the fact that “many of the metaphors we today use to express our feelings correspond to the idea that emotion is something external: we are ‘overcome with rage’, ‘seized by pleasure’, and ‘love-struck’” (14).

which Burns, in his representation of blacks on the Canal Bridge in Richmond in 1865 “co-opted the truth of the photograph, its dark historical weight, into a well-worn triumphalist fiction, namely that the battle for the freedom of the slave was the justification for the war” (215). Wood, in this text as in others, is preoccupied by the ways in which historical facts are often distorted in the interest of “generalizations, simplifications, and over-dramatizations” meant to appeal to contemporary emotional criteria for viewing the past.³ In an article devoted to English abolitionist poetry, Tobias Menely points to the difficulty involved in applying contemporary attitudes on emotion to the past when he explains that sympathy, which was “promoted by Enlightenment moral philosophers as the crucial medium of ethico-political community [...] has developed a modern reputation as being neither consistent enough to constitute an ethical virtue nor charged enough to provide a political motivation” (45).

As a theoretical approach to the problems involved in analyzing the fictional treatment of emotion in a historical perspective I will refer to the work of William Reddy, an American anthropologist who has studied the history of emotions through a theory revolving around the use of what he calls emotives.⁴ In *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*, Reddy tackles the theoretical difficulties of accounting for historical changes in the expression of emotion. His theory makes it possible to identify the problems involved in discussing emotion and thus enables us to have at our disposal a vocabulary for talking about it. This is extremely important, for it is precisely the difficulty of pinning down the notion itself that makes any discussion of emotion an extremely slippery terrain. The very conception

³ Wood has not spared Caryl Phillips in this critical enterprise. In *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, he attacked Phillips for the way he modified details concerning the slaves when he transposed John Newton’s log book in the third section of *Crossing the River*. He considers that no matter what Phillips did in modifying certain details, he could not really recreate the experience of the slave ships in doing this and that his “sources squat on the writing like milky incubus” (10).

⁴ Reddy’s use of this term relies on Austin’s speech act theory developed in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). (Reddy 96-104)

of emotion is embedded in the history of the way in which it has been conceptualized and discussed over time. This explains, for instance, according to Reddy the “commonsense belief that emotion is something separate from thought, something opposed to ‘reason’,” (14), whereas the investigations of cognitive psychologists have demonstrated the difficulty of establishing an experimental basis for distinguishing cognition from emotion (Reddy 3-33). The most important difficulty in this area is the potential conflict between a universalist or essentialist approach to emotion and a constructivist one. As Reddy explains:

From the very beginning to this day, the anthropology of emotions has been caught on the horns of this dilemma: how much influence to attribute to culture, how much to attribute to underlying universal psychic factors. Does death bring grief everywhere, or just in those cultures where the individual is highly valued? Is romantic love a universal human experience, celebrated in some cultures, suppressed in others – or is it just the creation of Western individualism? (37)

Clearly postcolonial studies have relied heavily on a constructivist approach as a way of examining the effects of cultural imperialism on the perception of other cultures (Carey and Festa 8).⁵ Reddy, working himself as an anthropologist, finds that this position leads to a conceptual dead-end which makes it impossible to account for cultural and historical change:

Because we associate emotions so closely with goals, motivations and intentions, insofar as one treats emotions as culturally constructed, one becomes unable to attribute to individuals any goals, motivations, or intentions that come from outside culture. Thus the individual cannot want anything unless the culture has taught him or her to want it. [...] Political power and political oppression in a culture other than our own, as a result, lack significance for us because it is only in terms of the emotional makeup of members of that culture that suffering, oppression, or desire for liberty can be defined for them. In such a constructed emotional world, history leads to no meaningful change because, even when a culture changes, individuals continue to suffer or to be happy in just the ways their culture prescribes. There is no way in which we can say that such change leaves them better off or worse off. (46)

Our common sense as readers of novels like *Crossing the River* tells us that, although the novel relies for its authenticity on the reconstruction of the emotional context of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Black Atlantic, it also produces a vision of emotional

⁵ Carey and Festa consider however that this approach to the effects of the Enlightenment is rooted in a reductive vision of the “West,” which they see as having “no coherent or credible referent. It is an ideological category masquerading as a geographic one” (10).

resistance that makes the story meaningful for the contemporary reader. As Reddy puts it, “If emotional change is to be something other than random drift, it must result from interaction between our emotional capacities and the unfolding of historical circumstances” (45). Reddy approaches this dilemma through a series of concepts that make it possible to talk about the relationship between individuals and their cultural and historical context and that take into account the distinction between emotion, cognition and language.⁶ Thus emotives, as he defines them are utterances or “speech acts” that possess (1) descriptive appearance, (2) relational intent, and (3) self-exploring and self-altering effects. Because of this third property, emotional expressions, which I call emotives, are like performatives in that they do something to the world” (111).⁷ The second important concept is the idea of *translation* as

something that goes on, not just between languages and between individuals, but among sensory modalities, procedural habits, and linguistic structures. This idea points, not toward a reconstitution of a Cartesian type of subjectivity, but toward a conception of the individual as a site where messages arrive in many different languages or codes [...]. Every utterance, every expressive act, can be viewed as the outcome of convergent translation tasks. (Reddy 85)

Reddy gives these concepts historical depth by relating them to what he calls “emotional regimes” which can be either “strict” or “loose” depending on the amount of “scope for self-exploration and navigation” (125) that they allow. The idea of “navigation” used in the title refers to “what emotives accomplish, because navigation includes the possibility of radically changing course, as well as that of making constant corrections in order to stay on a chosen course” (122). It is thus a way of talking about the way in which an individual manages his personal goals within an emotional regime:

[...] strict regimes offer strong emotional management tools at the expense of allowing greater scope for self-exploration and navigation. Loose regimes allow

⁶ This is crucial because otherwise one remains locked in the poststructuralist distinction between signifier and signified and the analysis of discourse becomes the only tool for examining the past. Reddy says in speaking of Foucault that “by examining fragments of text from the past, one attempted to discern what relation between word and thing was presumed in them” (70).

⁷ The notion of performativity has been applied extensively in postcolonial studies, but the emphasis has been on acts and language, without taking into account the way in which both translate emotion.

for navigation and allow diverse sets of management tools to be fashioned locally, individually, or through robust subgroup formation. (125)

Reddy applies his theories to a study of the context preceding the French Revolution and the way in which a strict emotional regime produced the sentimentalism that structured Revolutionary thought and action. For Reddy, sentimentalism corresponded to “a novel view of emotions as a force for good in human affairs” which led to “an effort to transform all of France, by means of benevolent gestures of reform, into a kind of emotional refuge” (146). The notion of “emotional refuge” is important, because any strict emotional regime “will generate practices, relationships, and venues that provide temporary, local suspension of the mental control efforts prescribed by the emotional regime in place” (154).

Reddy’s model provides us with a frame for better understanding emotion as an active and dynamic force in a specific context rather than as a perceptual window through which a contemporary reader views a historical character. Phillips is clearly aware that emotion in a historical frame can only be represented in the complex interactions between characters and their context. Rather than showing or telling us how his characters feel, he represents them caught in the process of *translation* as defined by Reddy. He also reveals the difficulty they experience in adjusting their goals to those defined as appropriate by the emotional regime to which they belong, in this case pre-Civil War America with its slave culture and growing commercialism.

The historical context of “The Pagan Coast” corresponds to a “strict emotion regime” (Kloos 484) in which the “emotional suffering” to which Reddy refers arises from the necessity of “liv[ing] enslaved as property in a land built on the Declaration of Independence” (Kloos 484). As Reddy points out, capitalist democracies can “consolidate stark differences” and this is an apt description of American society at the time. Although the American Revolution was an outgrowth of the reforming sentimentalism of the Enlightenment, in

America, sentimentalism, as a form of “emotional management” was confronted with the necessity of making compromises with a slave-based economy. As Margaret Abruzzo has so convincingly demonstrated, the colonization project that lies at the centre of “The Pagan Coast” is a direct result of this type of compromise. She writes:

Although humane culture demanded that good people sympathize with suffering victims, the practical outcomes of that sympathy took many shapes in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglo-American world. While Clarkson thought that meaning of sympathy was clear, pointing unequivocally to antislavery, humaneness achieved its exalted role not because its meaning was obvious, but precisely because humaneness could mean many different things. (190)

Abruzzo explains that the colonization movement stemmed from an attempt to reconcile the call for emancipation as a humane gesture with the unacceptability of allowing freed slaves to remain in the United States: “Colonization fed upon and nourished the idea that free blacks lived in greater misery than their enslaved counterparts” (Abruzzo 205).

Nash’s situation in “The Pagan Coast” is a fictional exploration of the cultural and social paradoxes represented by colonization. It can be seen as a *mise en abyme* of the public and personal conflicts generated by an essentialist view of humaneness which simultaneously granted sympathy to the slave and required his removal from a utopia he would inevitably disrupt by his presence. Nash’s letters show the former slave desperately attempting to adjust to the multiple difficulties and solicitations of an unfamiliar context without giving up the emotional framework that shapes his relation to America and to Edward. He must continue to express gratitude for his former master’s humanity while attempting to adapt to the difficulties created by his expulsion from the paradise of humaneness. To the extent that Nash adheres to Edward’s view of his civilizing mission in Africa, he is encouraged to adopt an essentialist view which admits no relativism; this corresponds to an imperative to transform Africa into the mirror image of his American home. He is torn between this position and its opposite, a constructivist view which he finally adopts by admitting that in Africa, “the sensible man [...]

must reap what grows naturally” (62). This situation generates what Reddy defines as “emotional suffering” since Nash is unable to align his personal goals with the requisites of the emotional regime by which he continues to define himself. This accounts for the curious hodge-podge nature of his letters, at once description of Africa, communication of feeling and call for attention and aid.⁸ Nash’s attempts to navigate the physical discomfort of the climate, the reactions of the Africans to his presence, the “strange sights” found in the natural context reflect the “sensory, linguistic, relational and status codes” put into play in speech acts seen as “translation tasks” (Reddy 85). Nash is so busy “translating” in emotional terms that he eventually breaks down entirely.

In the story of Nash and Edward, Phillips makes particularly effective use of the tensions implicit in the emotional regime of slavery as a lens for examining the personal friction between Edward and his former slave. We can read Nash’s use of emotives as the sign of a difficulty in adjusting his personal relationship with Edward to the contradictions revealed by his experience in Africa. In the letter dated October 2, 1840, Nash says:

Having long passed through the acclimatizing process, and having watched others do so with equal success, I am glad that I can say that I *love* this country more than I did at first. [...] This year we have been blessed with little rain, and the sun has parched up most of all of the crops in the fields, so if you would be so kind as to send me out something, I would feel much obliged. Anything, I do not mind what it is, for I feel sure that it will make a valuable contribution. (39, my emphasis)

The emotive by which Nash declares his love for Africa is, in the terms used by Reddy, both “self-exploratory” and “self-affecting.” Nash’s expression of love for Africa is performative in the sense that it contributes to realigning his affection and producing the change that will take place over the course of his stay. But what is striking in this passage is also his direct, almost desperate appeal to Edward for “anything” that he might send. This appeal reflects the

⁸ The letters from Liberia published in Wiley’s collection reveal the same disorderly presentation. However, Phillips shapes this curious heterogeneity to his narrative project. This is a clear sign that the criticism of his technique of montage, so severely criticized by Marcus Wood, is not a betrayal of the identity of real historical persons.

conflict between his love for Edward, which stands by metonymy for his love of America, and his growing love for Africa. In the same letter Nash says, “I like this place very well, but my greatest desire is that I may see you once more in this world” (38).

The epistolary form becomes in *Crossing the River* a particularly effective means of revealing the gaps and fissures in the emotional regime of pre-Civil War America. Historians have shown how correspondence, like diaries, reveals the emotional control exercised by society over the intimate lives of individuals. The conservative dimension of the formal aspects of letter writing also exposes the slippage between personal feeling and social convention. In the case of Nash’s correspondence with Edward, the latter’s silence highlights the social, geographical and temporal distance between America and Africa, exacerbating the emotional devastation caused by the changes taking place in Nash’s emotions. This growing personal conflict serves to reveal what cannot be stated in the public sphere: the need for a change in the emotional regime of America. This can only be achieved by the abolition of slavery. The increasing gap between Nash’s desire to civilize Africa in order to make it a mirror image of his American home and his need to become African himself, to make Africa his home is given concrete expression in the repeated requests for supplies. They serve to displace his desire to improve America, the one wish to which he cannot give explicit expression, through a request for supplies to make Africa more like America

Dear Father, perhaps you will please send me one bonnet and an umbrella, if you please. And some cloth to make one white frock, as there is none to be found in this country. These things will not prove difficult for you to get, for there is plenty in America and nothing here. Can you please send writing paper and quills or steel pens. Also flour and pork, and other articles you may think will be of service to me, including a hoe, an axe, some trowels and some hammers. If you, or any of your kind family to whom I am already under so many obligations, shall send anything for me, it shall not be misplaced charity, for provision is scarce. (35)

Nash refers to “misplaced charity,” but what is at stake here is displaced love. The contrast between the “plenty in America” and the “nothing here” is an appeal to Edward to look at the

gap between the theory of colonization and the emotional and physical poverty it has produced. Throughout the correspondence, a curious discrepancy appears between the emotional intensity of Nash's appeals for response and recognition and the plebeian nature of the details he provides concerning his daily life. It is in this gap that the intensity of the feeling surrounding the paradoxical emotional regime of slavery can be felt:

Like all new countries, this is a very hard one, and some kindness on your part would have been pleasing to me. Should you have chosen to send me seeds of all description, I would have gladly made some use of them. (40)

This passage relies on a curious equation between the harshness of the African environment and Edward's absence of emotional response. The request for seeds makes this strange hiatus between public policy and personal emotion all the more obvious.

Phillips is particularly good at creating these moments of friction in which the incompatibility between personal goals and public policy takes emotional form. Throughout Nash's correspondence with Edward, there appears to be a gap between the informational content of Nash's texts and the emotional charge that they carry. This is a very effective way of expressing the complex emotional environment of slavery and its impact on the individuals involved. The uneven surface of interpersonal communication reveals the cracks and fissures that characterize the emotional regime of a period and its effect on individuals. The third section of the novel is an explicit demonstration of this emotional dissonance. The effusive emotion expressed in James Hamilton's letters stands in stark contrast to the impersonality of his journal. In one of his letters to his wife Hamilton says:

At present, I cannot imagine writing with pleasure to any on land or sea but your own dear self, my head being full of the *petty* concerns of this *valuable* vessel, and the lives of the people who dwell hereabouts, whose fortunes are entrusted to my care. These are, indeed, *petty* concerns when set against my love for you, for I can declare, with honour, that barely an hour of my past life comes to mind with any pleasure, excepting *valuable* and *precious* time I have passed in your company, and for that I think the innumerable miseries and pains of my previous unhappy life, not a dear purchase. (108, my emphasis)

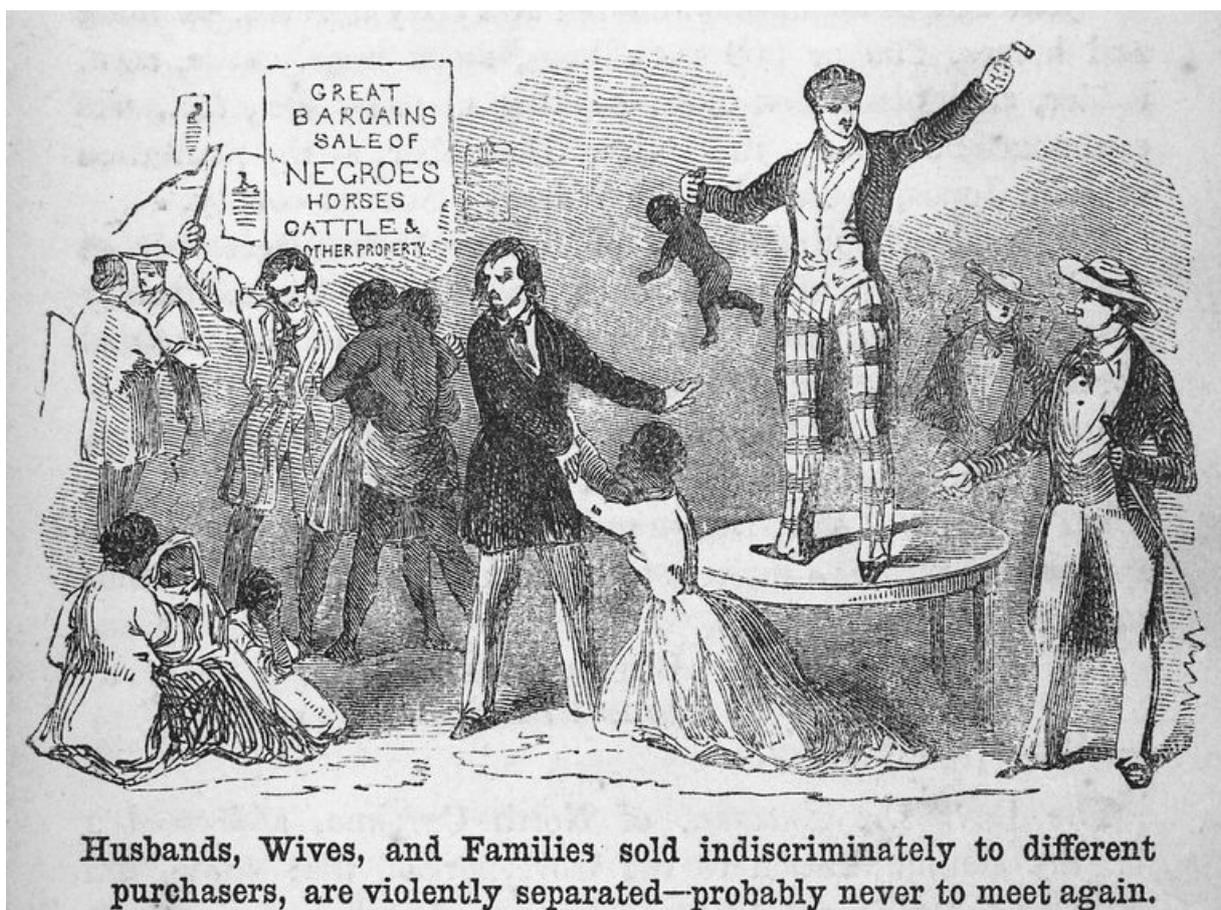
From the point of view of the relationship between emotional regimes and personal goals, this passage is much less revealing for its effusive emotion than for the way it denotes the absence of any awareness of a conflict between public and personal notions of value. The use of the word “petty” in referring to his professional preoccupations does not change the fact that both the ship and his relationship with his wife are defined as “valuable.” It reflects, on the contrary, the conventions of sentimentalism, which require exaggeration of emotion, an effect which Hamilton achieves through the contrast between “petty” and “valuable.” Furthermore, the emphasis on the value of the ship reveals by contrast the absence of any awareness of the value of the slaves as sentient, feeling human beings.

This passage points up the internal contradiction that was implicit in sentimentalism as an emotional refuge. As Stephen Ahern points out in his introduction to the collection of essays *Affect and Abolition in the Anglo-Atlantic, 1770-1830*, “sentimentalism was the glue that bound together the disparate elements of Anglo-American culture” (2). Sentimental representations, in both fictional and non-fictional contexts, served to uphold the “increasing sense of the dignity of the individual” that was “the cornerstone of the applied ethics of Enlightenment culture” (5). However, as my remarks on the colonization movement show, a sentimentalist approach to slavery could have diverse effects as a form of emotional management or emotional refuge. While sentimentalism was used to buttress the means of persuasion used by Abolitionists, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a clear demonstration of this, it could have perverse effects. Even in fiction that did not revolve around slavery, it could have the result of objectifying and dehumanizing the very individuals it was supposed to defend. This was caused partly by what Ahern calls “the formulaic quality” of the “repertoire of possible scenarios to generate the requisite heightened affect” (11). Through the interchangeable nature of stock representations of distress, the characters in sentimental fiction found themselves in a “system of commodity exchange” that deprived them of their

status as individuals. George Boulukos has explored the effects of one of these common fictional scenarios, that of the grateful slave, which was influenced by the novels of Defoe. He shows that the gratitude of slaves whose condition is improved by “a sentimental planter or overseer” reflects a trope “which begins with a nod to human similarity, in the sentimental attention to slave suffering, but ends with the suggestion of meaningful difference, as the slaves are so overwhelmed by passionate, irrational gratitude that they enthusiastically accept their state of slavery” (4). He points out that Thomas Jefferson, in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) explained racial difference by “discriminating by implication between the capacity to experience emotions and the ability to manage them” (143). Equally important to the contradictory effects of sentimentalism is the way in which the reader is “asked to at once inhabit and to observe from afar the subjectivity of the lover or the slave in torment” (Ahern 11).

Against the background of this description of the functioning of sentimentalism in representations of slavery, it is possible to observe how Caryl Phillips uses the slave auction, an important scene in the repertoire of sentimentalism, to draw attention to the problematic status of emotion in this type of representation. An examination of paintings representing slave auctions like those analyzed by Maurie McGinnis in *Slaves Waiting for Sale* allows us to understand how he has reorganized the reader’s perception of the slave auction in order to represent the emotional stakes for Martha. McGinnis describes the evolution of a tradition of representing slave auctions for use in abolitionist publications. She explains how an illustrated book by an English-born Presbyterian minister, George Bourne, helped to establish pictorial conventions that were reproduced by other illustrators (Chapter 2). The plate entitled *Auction at Richmond* emphasizes the function of the auctioneer, whose pivotal role is represented through his central position and the gesture signifying the sale. In discussing the representation of women, McGinnis points out that the use of woodcuts “did not allow artists

to render emotions in the expressions of the figures. Instead, meaning was communicated by gesture and composition and supplied by the readers' imagination" (Chapter 2). If we look at an illustration from the *American Antislavery Almanac* entitled *Selling a Mother from Her Child* (1840), we can see the difference between Phillips's representation of Martha's situation and the one depicted visually. As McGinnis points out, in the picture, which shows a mother being separated from her child by a slave trader, "the void in the center of the picture effectively communicated the chasm that would forever separate them" (Chapter 2). The woman is represented through her helplessness and the void to which McGinnis refers must be filled by the emotion of the spectator. A similar remark can be made about the picture represented below, in which the positioning of the participants suggests the violence of the emotions involved.⁹



Husbands, Wives, and Families sold indiscriminately to different purchasers, are violently separated—probably never to meet again.

⁹ This image is taken from Wikipedia and is in the public domain.

"Five hundred thousand strokes for freedom ; a series of anti-slavery tracts, of which half a million are now first issued by the friends of the Negro." by Armistead, Wilson, 1819?-1868 and "Picture of slavery in the United States of America. " by Bourne, George, 1780-1845

We could say in a sense that in reversing the direction of the gaze in his description of the slave auction, placing Martha in the centre as observer rather than simply victim, Phillips fills the void seen in these illustrations with Martha's perception. By reversing the normal direction of the gaze in his description of the selling of Martha and her family, Phillips makes of Martha not the object of other people's scrutiny, as was the case in paintings representing slave auctions, but the observer of a practice which epitomized the dehumanization involved in slavery. Furthermore he attributes agency to Martha in ways that demonstrate the "self-exploring" and "self-affecting" aspects of emotives. Like Nash, Martha in this scene is frantically translating her thoughts and perceptions as she watches her master "who holds a handkerchief to his face and looks on with detachment," "the traders with their trigger-happy minds, their mouths tight and bitter," or the auctioneer, "dressed formally. Dark vest, colorful cutaway coat" (76-7). Although there are no verbalized emotives expressing her reactions, the result of her management of a complex jumble of emotions will be the decision to let her daughter go, as "on her own she stands a better chance of a fine family" (77). Faced with a conflict between two goals, keeping her family together or betting on the possibility that alone her daughter will stand a better chance, she chooses the latter, thus eclipsing by her capacity to act any temptation on the part of the reader to assimilate her to the depersonalized suffering slaves often represented in paintings of the period. Phillips's representation of the slave auction captures the emotional regime of slavery by exposing the conditions for the exercise of what Reddy calls "emotional liberty." To say that he allows Martha to acquire interiority does not do full justice to the accuracy of his understanding of the emotional context in which slave auctions were represented and of the way in which these very representations risked depriving the individuals portrayed of any possibility of exercising physical or emotional

control.

In looking at *Crossing the River* through the frame of William Reddy's conceptualization of the historicization of emotion, I am not claiming a specific intention on the part of the author to mobilize this type of understanding. Rather I would say that Caryl Phillips brings to his fiction a clear understanding of the historical contexts with which he deals and at the same time a capacity to represent emotion indirectly through speech and action. Together these two dimensions of his writing produce an emotional authenticity which can be demonstrated through reference to Reddy's discussion of the history of emotions. Such an approach can help us to avoid some of the traps involved in reading the past through the window of the present. It can also, inversely, allow us to better understand the emotional regime in which we live as twenty-first century readers.

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